



A Study of Sthira Śiras Bheda in Bālarāmabhāratam and Its Application in Bharatanāṭyam

¹Divya V, ²Stella Marie

¹PhD Researcher, ²Research Supervisor

¹School of Music and Fine Arts

¹Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Pallavaram, Chennai, India

Abstract : This paper explores the distinctive classification of *Sthira śiras bhedas* (head gestures) as presented in the *Bālarāmabhāratam*, a lesser-known but significant treatise on classical Indian dance. Unlike earlier texts such as *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Abhinaya Darpana*, and *Nṛtta Ratnākara*, the *Bālarāmabhāratam* introduces a tripartite division—*Sthira* (motionless), *Asthira* (moving), and *Khaṇḍita* (breaking)—based on the functional dynamics of head movement. This study highlights the unique gestures added by the author, their practical relevance to Bharatanatyam, and the nuanced differences from earlier traditions.

IndexTerms - Bālarāmabhāratam, Śiras Bheda, Abhinaya, Sārvaṅga Abhinaya

I. INTRODUCTION

Head gestures (*śiras bhedas*) are integral to Indian classical dance, serving both aesthetic and narrative functions. While foundational texts like *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* laid the groundwork for their classification, the *Bālarāmabhāratam* offers a fresh perspective by expanding the repertoire and reorganizing it based on movement dynamics. This system divides head gestures into three functional groups—*Sthira* (motionless), *Asthira* (moving), and *Khaṇḍita* (breaking)—based on the manner in which the head is employed in performance.

The *Sthira* category encompasses gestures that denote static positioning of the head, serving as foundational postures that anchor the dancer's expression. In contrast, *Asthira* gestures involve dynamic movements. The third category, *Khaṇḍita* comprise gestures that break or interrupt the head's position at the end of a pose.

Within this framework, the *Bālarāmabhāratam* identifies eleven gestures under *Sthira*, including *Sama*, *Añcita*, *Adhomukha*, *Udvāhita*, *Utkṣipta*, *Nikuñcita*, *Skandhānata*, *Pāśvābhīmukha*, *Parāvṛtta*, *Adhūta*, and *Tiryonnatonnata*. Thirteen gestures are listed under *Asthira*, such as *Dīrghākampita*, *Kampita*, *Dhūta*, *Vichūta*, *Avadhūta*, *Calita*, *Lolita*, *Ārātrika*, *Parivāhita*, *Kaṇḍarāmśa*, *Udveṣṭita*, and *Apaveṣṭita*. The six *Khaṇḍita* types—*Puraḥkhaṇḍita*, *Paścātkhaṇḍita*, *Pāśvakhaṇḍita*, *Ūrdhvakhaṇḍita*, *Adhaḥkhaṇḍita*, and *Viśamakhaṇḍita*—further expand the expressive range available to the performer.

This study focuses specifically on the *sthira śiras bhedas* that can be practically adapted to the Bharatanāṭyam repertory.

II. Sthira Śiras (Motionless Head Gestures)

2.1 *Sama* is the first among the head gestures in *Bālarāmabhāratam*. It refers to a motionless head held straight like a stick. When the head moves slightly forward, backward, or to either side while remaining still, it is still considered *Sama Seersha*. Though *Nāṭyaśāstra* does not mention *Sama* as a head gesture, it does describe a similar neck gesture. *Abhinaya Darpana* is the first to introduce *Sama* as a head gesture, and *Bālarāmabhāratam* elaborates on its numerous usages (*vinīyogas*).

2.2 *Añcita* is described as a slight forward bend from the *Sama* position. In contrast, *Nāṭyaśāstra* defines *Anjita* as a slight bend to one side. *Abhinaya Darpana* does not mention this gesture. Practically, *Añcita* is more commonly used than *Adhomukha*, as it allows better facial expression visibility. It serves as a transitional pose between *Sama* and *Adhomukha*.

2.3 *Adhomukha* involves a downward bend of the face from the *Sama* pose. Though mentioned in many texts, including *Abhinaya Darpana*, it is rarely used in Bharatanatyam due to its tendency to obscure facial expressions. Dancers prefer *Añcita* for its expressive clarity.

2.4 *Udvahita* refers to a slight upward lift of the head from the *Sama* position. *Nāṭyaśāstra* calls this gesture *Adhuta*. It is used to express curiosity or reverence.

2.5 *Ukṣiptam* is a more pronounced upward lift, with the chin raised and eyes open, gazing skyward. A subtle distinction exists between *Ūkṣiptam* and *Uddhvahita-mukha*. The latter can be interpreted as an intermediate position between *Sama* and *Ūkṣiptam*, where the head is only slightly raised, unlike *Ūkṣiptam*, which involves a full upward tilt. In practice, the use of *Ūkṣiptam* in dance resembles that of *Adhomukha*, as both tend to obscure facial expressions. Hence, in *Bharatanāṭyam*, greater emphasis is placed on *Uddhvahitam* rather than *Ūkṣiptam*.

2.6 *Skandānata* involves tilting the head toward one shoulder, either left or right. It is used to depict sleep, intoxication, adding medicine to the ears, or deep thought and is frequently employed in *Bharatanatyam*. Notably, it is not referenced in classical treatises like the *Abhinayadarpaṇa* or the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

2.7 *Pārśvābhīmukham* - A variation of *Skandānata*, this gesture includes a slight lift and forward gaze. It is used to depict actions such as peering into a hole or observing something closely.

2.8 *Adhūta* is a subtle upward tilt while the head is turned sideways. It is used to express attentive listening or regal leisure, such as a king reclining.

2.9 *Tiryonnatonnata* is a gesture where the face is turned and lifted upward, often used to indicate objects on either side. Though similar to *Udvahitam*, it differs when the head gets turned towards either side when looking up. We practically use it when we show objects on either side.

III. CONCLUSION

The *Bālarāmabharatam* offers a refined and expanded framework for understanding *śiras bheda*s, introducing new gestures and a functional classification that aligns with the expressive needs of *Bharatanatyam*. This study not only bridges textual tradition with performance practice but also invites further exploration into underrepresented treatises in Indian dance literature. The practical emphasis on expressive clarity and movement dynamics makes this classification especially valuable for contemporary performers and scholars alike.

IV. REFERENCES

- [1] Sharma V.S. *Balaramabharatham* Saraswathi. Kottayam, National Book Stall, 1982.
- [2] Bala Rama Varma, Karthika Thirunal . *Bala Rama Bharatham*. Translated by V S Sharma, 1st ed., Trivandrum, Dr V.S Sharma, 2004.
- [3] Banerjee, Utpal K, and Leela Venkataraman. *Exquisiteness of Indian Classical Dance : Rasa & Bhava*. Gurgaon, India, Shubhi Publications, 2017.
- [4] Kapila Vatsyayan. *INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE*. Publications Division Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 1974.
- [5] Nampoothiry, E Easwaran. *Balaramabharatam - a Critique on Dance and Drama*. Trivandrum, Keralasamkritam Publications, 1983.
- [6] Varma Vanchi Maharaja, Balarama . *The Balarama Bharatam*. 1935. Edited by K Sambasiva Sastri, Trivandrum, Travancore Sanskrit Series No CXVIII.